

# The Burial

## *Preamble*

The essay that follows is an experiment in writing short memoir. At the heart of my thinking and experimentation for this piece was the idea that memoir, unlike some other kinds of writing, relies very heavily on memory. This is quite an obvious point, but one that set me to thinking about the qualities of memory itself. Memory is partial, fragmentary, and often hazy or veiled. Another, quite significant, aspect of memory is that it is not immediate; it is somewhat distant or indirect. That distant aspect of memory is what facilitates and inspires creative and critical reflection. For me, writing is more able to privilege a reflective distance than visual mediums. While writing this piece then, I wanted to foreground ways of describing action that brought forward those unique aspects of memory. This is reflected in the piece in a distance around action that mirrors the way we recall and retell events from the past.

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*Saint Aidan's Church, Dayboro, Queensland, Australia, 1982.*

I'm thinking it's a miracle that they managed to fit my grandmother into her coffin. The coffin is the first thing I see when we enter the church. It seems so small and she was such a large figure, ample in form and personality. She was schizophrenic—wild, delusional—and also quite fat. I picture the morticians stuffing her into the casket like too much luggage into an over-packed suitcase. But they say death diminishes. Death reduces. Like a hot sun to a grape on the vine, or a clothes dryer to a polyester sweater. Something like that.

As we head down the aisle, I'm anxious about the fact that I'm not feeling what

I should be feeling. I'm not grieving at all. I just feel guilty for not reacting to my grandmother's death the way everyone else in the church is; with tears and a slow-trembling sadness. It's becoming clear to me that I'm an evil child. I worry that I'll be found out.

It's the first time I've ever been to this church, and the first time I've been to Dayboro. I find it hot and strange. Not like the cooler, leafier town where we live up on the downs, three hours drive away. We don't know many of the people gathered here either. But this is where my grandmother was born and grew up. This is her hometown. Her funeral is her belated homecoming. It doesn't take long for me to decide that I don't think much of the place.

When we first take our seats, an old, one-eyed man across the aisle leans forward and says, 'You three are the prettiest little set of sisters I've ever seen.' Even though he says it in a voice meant to convey that he's paying my sisters and I a great compliment, it feels like he's slapped me in the face. My cheeks burn red. I turn my face away from him and fume. My sisters giggle and poke me in the ribs, rubbing it in. I'm always being mistaken for a girl and they think it's hilarious.

When the ceremony starts, I'm still fuming; sitting stiffly in-between my sisters and resolutely refusing to look in the direction of that old Cyclops. We're lined up on the wooden pew as though we're the proverbial three monkeys. Three blonde monkeys. As far as all those strangers are concerned, three *girl* monkeys. I spend so many minutes trying to decide whether I'm See, Speak, or Hear No Evil that I miss the beginning of the eulogy. I figure it's no great loss. I don't need a total stranger to tell me about my grandmother. I've lived with her all my life, the parts of it that she wasn't in the mental hospital anyway. When she was away, I slept in her room, in her very bed. I grew up surrounded by the possessions and memories of an old woman: Wedgewood figurines,

rose-patterned tea-cups and boxes and boxes of photographs and letters. The litter of someone else's life. I slept on her fat feather pillow and had my dreams on that pillow as well, breathing in the lavender and lemony scents of old age. Thus my peculiar way of seeming more like a geriatric woman than a fourteen year old boy.

Everyone says that I'm just like her. We even look alike. Same eyes. Same nose. Same wavy hair. When you're a fourteen year old boy and everyone keeps telling you that you resemble your schizophrenic grandmother, your self-esteem plummets. All I hear them saying is *You're crazy and you look like an old woman*. Today, they're all saying it again. Whispering it to each other. But I hear them. *My goodness, doesn't he look exactly like his grandmother*. With her lying there dead, it feels like they're saying I'm a corpse. It brings death home.

The priest officiating over the funeral has a five o'clock shadow even though it's only ten in the morning. He has dark rings and bags under his eyes as well. He looks hung-over to me, but I'm a suspicious kind of kid and still angry about that one-eyed man's slur on my gender. As the priest drones on, saying things about my grandmother taken from notes probably put together hastily that morning, I decide that I'm Speak No Evil. The silent one. The monkey with dark secrets. There are many things that I cannot say. Things that I yearn for, desires I have, that even the intrusion of death has not dampened. If anything, the yearning has gotten worse since my grandmother passed away. I have no idea why. All I know is that my tongue is tied with shame and guilt.

It's hot inside the timber church, even with the high vaulted ceilings. Fans up in the rafters are turning as slow as time in a summer classroom. Not just any classroom either, a maths classroom on a Friday afternoon. The slow torture of trigonometry and arithmetic. The heat feels worse because the church looks more like a Swedish sauna than a place of worship. The walls and floors are all the same varnished hardwood. They glisten as if with sweat. I wonder if I should get up, under the scrutiny of dozens

of teary eyes, and walk over to the switch on the wall and crank the ceiling fans up. But I'm worried that they'll all think I'm a thoroughly wicked boy for seeking physical comfort rather than just sitting there and suffering in the appropriate, mournful, way. Or will they think *Oh well, it is hot after all?*

As I agonise over my decision, I stare at a religious poster sticky-taped to the unpainted walls. It depicts a burly saint wrestling a large serpent, like a boa constrictor. The snake appears to have the upper hand, but the saint is unconcerned. His dreamy eyes are cast upwards to heaven. I figure this is why the snake is winning: the saint's mind isn't on the job. He's clearly thinking of other things, harp music most likely. Or perhaps the celestial delights of heavenly virgins.

There's something disturbingly compelling about the image. The huge, green-scaled snake with its long, flexing body acting as a living, yet deadly, tourniquet. The doey, far-away look in the saint's eyes. His muscled arms struggling to break free, his bare, heaving chest, arched back and tensed thighs. The ardent struggle, the imminent snap and crack of the saint's ribcage.

It's all kind of darkly sexy. It triggers that secret yearning of mine, which inundates me and fills me with dread. It's a yearning that I don't ever want to answer. I don't want those urges. I don't want to be *that*. But at the same time I mourn over the fact that this strong wanting might always go unanswered, unmet, unsatisfied. I mourn over that more than I mourn over my grandmother. More thoughts I must hide, that must not be spoken.

I look into the struggling saint's eyes. They're almost the same colour as the sky outside. It's the same blue of some old medicine bottles I once found in my grandmother's bedroom. It's a blue that seems kind somehow, embracing. I make a prayer. *Please, don't let me be that, and don't let anyone find out.* I instantly wonder if there's any point praying to this bare-chested martyr. Does he have any real power? I

don't have a lot of knowledge of saints and martyrs, blue eyes or not.

My father thinks religion is a kind of brain sickness, like epilepsy. Something that makes you speak in tongues and quake and shiver; a disability, like having one leg shorter than the other. To him, believing in saints and angels is no different to believing in ghosts or leprechauns. The product of superstition, a womanly kind of thing. Not that he's a Renaissance man. The closest my father ever comes to Enlightenment is when he flips on the floodlights of his ute while out on a pig-shoot.

He's sitting in the row in front of me, shifting uneasily as if the clammy timber of the pew burns his backside. The way holy water singses the wicked. My mother is sitting next to him, her head held high as if defying lightning to strike. Though raised Catholic, my mother hasn't been to mass since she was sixteen. She is an exile from the church. She suffered under its intolerance when, at sixteen, she fell pregnant outside wedlock with my older sister.

My eyes make their way back to the switch on the wall. It has three settings: low, medium, high. It's currently set on low. My eyes drool over the word "high", imagining the delight of a firm breeze over my damp back. I'm still fixated on the switch when I hear a tiny noise at the window. A sparrow is hopping around on the sill outside. I'm an adolescent ornithologist. I see birds as symbols of solitude and quiet, of an anxiety free life. Somehow, it seems impossible that birds ever feel anxious. How could they when they can fly? But around here, sparrows are called feathered vermin, flying mice. They're an introduced, and therefore somehow unnatural, species.

But I associate sparrows with other things. They're not vermin to me. To me, they're messengers from other places and other times. A sparrow has a kind of beauty that's not about its form, but about its displacement. About its being where it doesn't belong. Sparrows embody their origin, not the place of their abiding. They're like little feathered time-capsules encasing the essence of other, long-gone places. Lost places

where things were less harsh, more beautiful.

As I watch the sparrow, a strange nostalgia dawns within me. A nostalgia tainted by a feeling of loss; a longing for times before my birth, when things were simpler. I've had this nostalgia for as long as I can remember. I don't fully understand it. I think it's incited by those little birds because they're aliens here. They're from cooler, greener places where the seasons turn calmly and predictably. Not like Queensland where drought and flood and bushfires take turns at terrifying us all.

Sparrows are not of the Australian landscape. In that sense, they remind me of myself. Out of place, alien, unwanted: a pre-pubescent anglophile yearning for somewhere to belong, somewhere people speak proper English and do things other than drink beer and watch football. These are not the feelings of "normal" fourteen year old boys. This strange sense of displacement could only be felt by someone like me. A kid who lives in an old woman's bedroom. A kid so shy that he barely speaks, who hides in the crawlspace under the house whenever anyone comes to visit. A freak, in other words.

I watch the sparrow a long while. It is peering in the window, has its head cocked to one side as if listening. It stays that way for minute after minute. The way it observes the service, as if it understands the solemnity of the whole thing, makes me think things about death. That maybe death is not what we think it is, that life is not what we think. Could the sparrow actually understand what's happening? Its little black eyes seem so knowing. But how could it comprehend the strange goings-on of the featherless creatures gathered in this stifling timber church? It couldn't, could it?

But maybe it's not just a bird? Or maybe it hasn't always been a bird? I've recently learnt about reincarnation. A bleach-blonde psychic who reads my mother's fortune told me all about it. I'm inclined to believe practically anything the blonde psychic tells me. She says that when I grow up I will be someone special, maybe even

famous. I don't want to be famous, but who doesn't want to be special? So I sit there wondering if perhaps the sparrow once had a different, flightless existence. I really want that to be the case. I desperately need to believe that there is something more to life, more than heat and flies and death. But a deeper part of me fears that this is it, that there is nothing else.

As I sit there thinking these things, squeezed between my two sisters, my grandmother's coffin before me with all its heaviness, its fullness, a small flicker of hope rises. Perhaps I feel this nostalgia because *I've* lived before? Perhaps my sad nostalgia is for a life lived before this one? A better life. A life in which all the fans are set on high. Otherwise, why do I feel so attached to things that I've never known? Could this be a sign that there is actually more, that life is not just anxiety and unease and death? Perhaps the sparrow knows more about the universe, the mysteries of life, than I could ever hope to know?

The priest rounds off the mass with some strange gestures. I know they're heavy with meaning but I'm more or less a heathen and so they mean next to nothing to me. Everyone stands and makes their way towards the exit. My sisters and I file out into the aisle. Once there, I forget the fan and fix my eyes on the open door and the promise of fresh air. Outside, I can see the swaying, silvery-green of gum trees caught in a breeze outlined against a sharp blue sky.

I sigh with the heat. My great Aunt May, who is big and round and wears hats that are top-heavy with fake fruit, persimmons and peaches mostly, lunges forward and gathers me up in a suffocating embrace. She has mistakenly interpreted my sigh as a sound of grief.

I find myself blinded by her pressing body. The scent of sweat and floral perfume fills my nostrils. I feel like a sardine in a soft can. Then, with a mystifying swiftness, she drags my sisters into her arms as well. Her bosom is so vast that it

enfolds us all. We are compressed into one six-armed being with three fish-like mouths, wriggling for release, desperate for air. It's scary but I don't know real terror until I feel Aunt May's hard, plum sized nipple against my cheek. I scream into the folds of her dress. She jumps back, startled, releasing us. **She clutches her heart, muffled as its beat must be, buried so deep beneath her huge bosom.** After I'm free from her arms, I walk swiftly towards the door. I hear Aunt May sobbing behind me, saying, 'Poor little thing, he's overcome with grief.'

I want to turn and scream at her. I want to shout that I have no grief at all, that my grandmother spent so many years in mental institutions that I never really knew her. I want to tell everyone that she was a mad old lady who terrorized children with a drooling mouth full of crazy stories. And I want to tell Aunt May that her nipples are ridiculously large, that a law should be made against such things. Children should be protected from nipples so horribly huge.

Once out in the fresh air I regain my composure. I wait on the grass as everyone comes outside. We're still milling around as the coffin is carried out. It's some kind of tradition. I watch the pallbearers, my father among them, huff and puff as they lug my grandmother down the steps. When they reach the hearse they bump the coffin against the door and then unceremoniously slide it in. My father gives it one final shove, as if to say 'good riddance'.

He and my grandmother rarely got along. I think he resented the fact that he was, more or less, left to bring himself up. Her illness meant she wasn't much of a mother. She spent most of his childhood locked up in a psychiatric hospital, and he was placed in a boy's home as a result. Her schizophrenia made him an orphan. I don't think he ever forgave her.

After the hearse is underway, we all pile into our cars for the drive to the cemetery. Even our car seems inappropriate for a funeral. It's a metallic blue Ford



station wagon. We bought it second-hand. The other cars are all new, all black or grey, all sedans. As soon as we pull away from the church, my father turns on the radio. It's an act designed to shut out the funeral, to put it aside as if it were nothing. The disc-jockey is playing Elvis Presley. *Don't Be Cruel*. I think it's the perfect theme song for the day; a hymn of longing and a plea for empathy that I understand. As the song plays, my mind dwells on Elvis—the young one from the black and white movies with pomaded hair and pale skin, not the jump-suited, paunchy one. Thinking about him ignites that dreaded yearning. I try to block it out by looking out the window. We are passing by a large, bare paddock; ornamented by a single, lightning-struck gum tree that looks like a huge bony hand scratching at the sky.

When we arrive at the graveyard, there is a drama about car parks. They're all taken, so we have to park a long ways down the road and walk back. My father thinks that this just caps off a more or less crap day. He doesn't want to be here. He'd rather be at the races. By the time we get there, the mourners are already encircling the pit, the coffin's final home. A mango tree shades those opposite us, but we are in the full sun. The sickly sweet smell of the fallen fruit, and the disturbing buzz of flies, is all the tree provides those of us on the wrong side of the grave.

The priest is saying something about eternal reward in heaven. He makes some more strange hand gestures. At first I think he's waving away flies. Then the gravediggers—two good-looking but scruffy lads with black dirt under their fingernails—start lowering the coffin into the ground. They're wearing t-shirts that hug their torsos tightly. One is emblazoned with a Coca-Cola logo. Each of their ivory ribs is evident through the thinning cotton as they strain with the weight of the casket. Their grubby jeans hug their thighs in ways that remind me of the struggling saint, the crushing serpent. That yearning returns, even stronger: a feeling of loss, fear and desire in equal measure. But still nothing for my grandmother. I'm certain now that I'm a truly

evil child. I look away. I banish the image of the gravediggers and the saint from my mind. I quell the yearning with thoughts of the sparrow and of places where I might feel more at home, maybe even wanted.

Some moments later, as the funeral is winding up, I'm back to staring into the wide hole. I'm marvelling at how deep it is, how dark it seems down at the bottom. I just start thinking how much cooler it would be down there, how enticing the dark pit seems, when I notice a woman waving at me from the other side of the hole. I figure she's one of my great aunts. One of my grandmother's many sisters. She has the same body shape and face and eyes. My grandmother had thirteen brothers and sisters, an unlucky number. Family whispers say this is why so many of them go mad. All thirteen of them look very much alike, more alike than seems normal. They're almost a litter of thirteen twins. I look like one too, far too much for my liking; like a fourteenth twin born decades after the others.

This great aunt is wearing a white dress with huge blue flowers. Everyone else is wearing black, except for me. I'm wearing fawn coloured corduroy jeans and a fawn button-up shirt with a white hibiscus flower printed on the pocket. My grandmother always said that my mother dressed me like a pansy. Of course she was right, but to tell the truth I probably would've looked like a pansy even if I'd bought my own clothes. I had my grandmother's dress sense. Another side-effect of living in her bedroom.

The woman continues waving at me over the dark grave. Then, in a voice loud enough for all to hear, she says, 'I'm your great aunt Hilda. I hope you don't mind me asking dear, but I just can't tell... are you... a boy or a girl?' I throw an accusatory glare in my mother's direction. She looks both ashamed and defiant. I imagine my grandmother down in the pit, smirking with glee. She would've loved it that her sister disapproved of my mother's choices where boyswear were concerned. They were always at odds. For a second, I get an image of my grandmother down in her casket,

nestled among the coffin's white silk, her ancient hands clapping in wicked joy. It was something she often did; clap with total abandon, especially when she saw my mother being criticised or insulted. She *was* a lunatic, after all, but also kind of child-like. The image dissolves when I see my father's face.

He is filled with disgust. The fact that his son's gender is so ambiguous that people have to ask if he is a boy or a girl is more humiliating to him than he can bear. His disgust is pouring out at me from his glassy eyes, spurting forth from between his clenched teeth. He's a spitting cobra, all fangs and venom. I've seen this face before, many times, but it shocks me anyway. Something about it makes me feel that he hates me as much as he hated his mother. We've both humiliated him by being different, strange, not at all normal.

'Well dear, which is it?' Aunt Hilda is insisting on an answer. I feel mortified. What sort of madwoman shouts that sort of thing over an open grave? What sort of total crackpot doesn't wait until at least the first sod of dirt hits the coffin, with its sombre thud like falling snow, before she starts querying other mourners' gender? Clearly, she's as crazy as my grandmother. The family is full of them. Lunatics each and every one.

I'm mute with embarrassment, as are all those gathered there. She continues, 'It's just so hard to tell these days!' I can't believe my ears. I turn to my mother for help. She looks away, disowning me and her mistaken wardrobe selections. I look back over at Hilda, unaware what to say or do. She turns to a dour looking man beside her, appropriately dressed in black, and says 'It *is*, isn't it, very hard to tell boys from girls these days.' The man looks horrified to be drawn into this drama but, flashing a malevolent eye in my direction, mumbles, 'Yes, it is.'

I've had enough. I lose my temper. I shout, 'I happen to be a boy, thank-you very much!' Unfortunately I say it in such a shrill voice that I fear I've undermined any

certainly my statement might have produced. Everyone stares at me. I walk away.

When I reach the car, fuming, I hear laughter. Uproarious howls of laughter. I turn around and see that most of my relatives are bending over in stitches and stomping their feet on the ground. Some are even slapping their thighs. I see my father, his face in a wide grin, a deep laugh coming out of him in waves. I've never seen him like this. Sure, I've seen him guffaw and snigger, I've seen him laugh. He laughs a lot, but mainly at his own dirty jokes, or at the expense of others. But this is different. I've never seen him so utterly lost in delight. Tears are rolling down his face. He wipes them away with a swift hand and laughs even more. Lost in laughter, he is transformed. He's not my father at all, not the rough fists and shouted obscenities. He's just a man. A laughing man. A soft, vulnerable man. At first I feel indignant—he has withheld this side of himself from me—but then, quickly, I start to smile myself. It's infectious this laughter, kind of out of control and hysterical, but uplifting nevertheless.

I break out in giggles. Then, in-between my own laughter and the laughter of my fellow mourners, I hear the thud thud thud of soil hitting the coffin. The gravediggers are filling up the hole. I look up and see that they're laughing as well. One of them stops shovelling dirt and pulls up his shirt to wipe the sweat away from his face. For a moment, his belly-button is exposed; small and tantalizing in the midst of a rock hard stomach. That unspoken yearning rises up yet again, like an anaconda from deep within, and encircles me. But this time the feeling isn't mixed with fear or loss. The laughter has enabled me to feel it just as it is. And it feels good. I laugh even more.

The gravedigger returns to his work, still laughing, out of control. Then it hits me: the strange sensation that my grandmother is somehow still here. This is how she used to laugh; hysterically, with total absorption, with her whole being. That's when the sparrow lands on the hood of the car. It takes three hops towards me and chirps.

My mind goes quiet. I go quiet. The scene at the graveside recedes into the

background. I can taste the stillness of space. It's as if the bird has some strange power over matter and time. I'm absorbed in its small beauty and perfect displacement. I can now only barely hear the clods of soil landing on the coffin; a slow drumming, like a sleeping heartbeat. The sound triggers a wordless understanding.

We all experience and feel differently. No two of us react to something in the same way. Some wail at death. Some are numbed by it. Some hide from it. My grief comes in the form of a yearning for life: a desire for love and a love of desire. The sparrow ruffles its feathers and chirps again. That's when I notice that the sound of soil thudding onto the coffin has lost its sombre tone. It doesn't sound mournful anymore. It sounds joyful – like crazy hands in a rapture of slow clapping.